THE SACRED JOURNEY

2. Provisions

March 18, 1990

8:30 and 11:00 a.m. Worship Services

John M. Buchanan

Fourth Presbyterian Church, Chicago

Scripture
John 4:5-15
Exodus 17:1-7

"Behold, I will stand before you...and you shall strike the rock, and water shall come out of it, that the people may drink." -Exodus 17:6 (RSV)

Bruno Bettelheim died last week, one of this city's pioneers and saints. What an adventure his life was! An Austrian Jew who grew up in the Vienna of Sigmund Freud, Bettelheim did pioneering work with disturbed and autistic children. Along with most of the Viennese intelligencia he was rounded up by the Nazis, spent a year in Dachau, and was released through the efforts of Eleanor Roosevelt and others who had heard of his work with autism. He came to this country, to the University of Chicago. Here he continued important research and treatment.

In addition to directing a residential treatment center in Hyde Park, he wrote a number of popular books. The most widely read by non-professionals is The Uses of Enchantment, in which Bettelheim explored the importance of fairy tales in the personality development of children. It's a good book and when I took it off the shelf on the day he died last week, I found these opening words which caught my attention because I had been thinking about that wonderful story in the 17th chapter of Exodus when the people are in the wilderness and they are hungry and thirsty and scared and they complain and God provides. Bettelheim wrote:

> "If we hope to live not just from moment to moment, but in true consciousness of our existence, then our greatest need and most difficult achievement is to find meaning in our lives. It is well known how many of us have lost the will to live, and have stopped trying because such meaning has evaded them." [p. 3]

Bettelheim wrote a fascinating and somewhat controversial account of his Dachau experience for the New Yorker in which he concluded that the

people who survived the concentration camps were those who were able to live for some cultural or religious goal other than mere survival. That is, in the concentration camps, when the total meaning and focus of one's life has been reduced to survival - food and drink - the battle has been lost. Human life has become something less than human. When the oppressors, the captors, or when life itself, reduces human existence to survival terms, humanity has already lost. That is not to say that those who survived were morally superior to those who died. It is, he said, simply to observe that our humanity resides in something bigger and better than the physical needs of our bodies. A relevant observation, I thought, about those people complaining about their thirst in the wilderness.

I continued to skim through the book into the section where he analyzes the familiar fairy tales. Those stories, he taught, often provide children with a safe way to express and deal with basic fears and worries and desires. Hansel and Gretel, whose parents essentially abandon them because they are poor and can no longer feed them, speaks to childhood's "dominant anxiety," the threat of desertion and the loss of security. [p. 159]

It is a common motif in many of the stories we heard as children. Bettelheim observed: "in many fairy tales, being pushed out of home stands for having to become oneself. Self-realization requires leaving the orbit of home, an excruciatingly painful experience fraught with many psychological dangers." [p. 79]

That process, he taught, is inescapable and not confined to childhood. "Separation anxiety - the fear of being deserted - is not restricted to a certain period of development. Such fears occur at all ages." [p. 15]

And that I concluded, with a timely assist from Dr. Bettelheim, is exactly what happened one day in the wilderness of Sinai, when the children of Israel assembled in front of Moses and said: "Why did you bring us up out of Egypt, to kill us and our children and our cattle with thirst?"

It's actually the third time it occurred. In fact, it happens so much that the Old Testament scholars have a name for it... "The murmuring in the wilderness motif." Free of Egyptian slavery, wandering through the desert, the people are murmuring all the time: "What shall we drink?" [15:24] A little later they are hungry and the whole congregation murmurs against Moses and Aaron and this time it's eloquent.

> "Would that we had died by the hand of the
> Lord in the land of Egypt, when we sat by
> the fleshpots and ate bread to the full:
> for you have brought us out into the
> wilderness to kill this whole assembly
> with hunger." [16:3]

For several weeks during this Lenten season we are thinking about the idea that life is a **Sacred Journey**, an adventure to which we are called. I suggested last Sunday that the story of Abraham and Sarah is the basic Bible story. In that very old saga, God calls two people who are mature,

established and settled to pick up all their belongings and move. God promises them a future and when they trust God, the adventure of faith begins. I suggested that God calls each of us to a similar adventure and promises to be with us, that God has been there all along, urging us on, pulling us from the future, inspiring our hopes and dreams. I suggested that your life is a **Sacred Journey** because of God's presence.

The theme runs throughout the Bible, beginning to end. It appears again in the great saga of the Exodus. What a wonderful story it is, with what seems to me an endless variety of ways to surprise us with its relevance and contemporaneity.

Remember that Abraham and Sarah end up in Egypt for a while because there is no food where they are. Several generations later the Israelites are back in Egypt again, once again because there is famine where they are. This time there are a lot of them, tribes of them, and this time they stay in Egypt, settle in, and thrive some more: thrive so much that the Egyptians become concerned and gradually turn them into slaves. It happens slowly, of course; first one right, then another is taken away. First they aren't allowed to live in certain neighborhoods, next they have to live in a ghetto and in a few decades they are the slaves, making the bricks for Pharoh's ambitious construction projects.

Moses organizes them: stirs them up, presents their demands to Pharoh: argues, negotiates, threatens - all the while God is urging him on. After several false starts, Pharoh finally relents, and one night, under the cover of darkness, they leave. They pack up their belongings, gather their sheep and cattle, get the children and the elderly organized, look around at the old neighborhood one last time and walk into the wilderness.

Now the point is that even though they complained a lot, Egypt wasn't all that bad. As a matter of fact, Egypt was home: had been home for them all their lives, and their parents before them and their grandparents. It might look like slavery to a young radical like Moses, but it was also home. And so not long after they leave they begin to have second thoughts. "What in the world have we done? Traded our security, our stable, safe life for what? This is wilderness. There's nothing out here. Egypt isn't wonderful but at least we had a roof over our heads, and food to eat and water to drink."

And at the same time, Pharoh is having second thoughts too. His economic advisers, in the clear light of day, remind him that he has just allowed the labor force to walk out scot free. And so Pharoh changes his mind, mobilizes his forces and sends the army out to catch the people of Israel and bring them home.

One of the best parts of this story happens when the people who have made it to the banks of the Sea of Reeds - a broad, shallow swamp - see the dust of Pharoh's army approaching. This time it's not a murmur but a shout of terror:

"Is it because there are no graves in Egypt that you have taken us away to die in the wilderness. What have you done to us? It would have been better for us to serve the Egyptians than to die in the wilderness." [14:11-12]

What comes next is the unlikely escape at the Sea of Reeds and then the beginning of forty years of wandering in the wilderness of Sinai and the murmuring: "What will we eat? What will we drink? How will we survive, cut off from the security of home?"

It is a universal theme. A universally human question. It has to do with our development and maturity as persons, Bruno Bettelheim taught. It has to do with living life to its fullest. And this we must not miss, it has to do with faith, with living in responsible relationship with the one who has created us, given us our lives, and who calls us to live them with integrity and intentionality and courage. In fact, several thousand years before it was developmental psychology, it was good Biblical religion.

There is a sense in which life always calls us to leave security and comfort behind if we are to do and be all we can: a sense in which life is diminished to the degree that we invest it in the provision of comfort and security only.

The Outward Bound movement began when, Curt Hahn, a Jewish refugee from Nazi Germany and the founder of Gordonstown School in Scotland, observed that young British sailors were perishing, after their ships were sunk by Nazi U-boats in the North Atlantic, in dramatically larger numbers than their older, more seasoned mates. The young sailors were not surviving physical hardship because they didn't have any experience with it or apparently with the spiritual toughness for the will to live. The whole culture - the whole world - after the First World War, had become comfortable, Hahn concluded. So Outward Bound and a number of popular similar outdoor education programs structure physical hardship, challenge and discomfort for people of all ages. It is an intentional wilderness experience and for many people it is life enhancing and spiritually deepening.

It is also an occasion of no little murmuring very much like the wilderness murmuring of the children of Israel. I was a guest of the Outward Bound School, Hurricane Island, Maine, for a five-day course last summer, along with twenty other adult professional people. It was not forty years in the wilderness by any stretch of the imagination but I'll not forget any of it, including a memorable occasion of murmuring. Robin Lester, the Head Master of the Latin School, also a guest and participant, and I had a few moments to chat. We had just come in from three days in a thirty-foot open sail boat. We hadn't slept much; we were cold, wet, hungry, tired, slightly queasy from the ocean swells, and now Robin and I were pulling a large cart full of dirty pots and pans to an open faucet where our job was to scrub them all. On top of everything it was pouring rain. Robin chose that moment to ask something terribly incisive: "What do you suppose our wives are doing right now?" And then, in spite of the fact that we both knew better we began an only slightly

tongue-in-cheek recital of what we would be doing: how warm and pleasant and comfortable it would be in Chicago. "Murmuring in the wilderness is a universally human experience."

The stories of Harriet Tubman and the underground railroad and slaves running away and living in the wilderness for months - traveling at night, hiding during the day, living off the land - are powerful and inspiring and instructive because for many runaway slaves, slavery began to look appealing after a day or so of freedom. Plantation life might be cruel, inhuman, demeaning, but there was food and shelter and security. The wilderness is the place where we are able to see with clarity how dependent we have become on security, safety and comfort. But, says this wonderful old story, the wilderness journey is also the place where we find God or God finds us.

God comes to Moses in a burning bush in the wilderness. In a period of tempting in the wilderness, Jesus encounters subtle temptation but the angels also come to him in the wilderness and it is in his wilderness experience that his sense of the meaning of his life and therefore his courage and determination is given to him. Part of the wilderness experience is the solitude in which mind and heart and spirit turn to God. Part of what all the outdoor education programs include is a period of solitary time: an extended period for aloneness, reflection and quiet. And for most, eventually, it is a spiritually significant time.

The mystics, the people of deep spirituality, know that to experience God you must detach, back away, let go of everything. That is part of what Israel learns in the wilderness. And it is not an easy lesson for those of us who are privileged and blessed with abundance.

Henri Nouwen has a wonderful little book on prayer which makes the point that you cannot pray with your fists clenched. It's an important observation. Prayer is less than a vital spiritual exercise for most of us because we feel threatened by letting go of our securities and standing before God with our hands empty and open. Nouwen talks about seeing a woman brought into the emergency room of a psychiatric hospital with her fists tightly clenched, holding on to one small coin, as though she would lose her very self if she let go of that coin. Nouwen writes:

> "When you are invited to pray you are asked to open your tightly clenched fists and give up your last coin. You hold fast to what is familiar, even if you aren't proud of it. You find yourself saying: 'That's just how it is with me. I would like to be different but it can't be now...' Once you talk like that you've already given up believing that your life might be otherwise. You feel it safer to cling to a sorry past than to trust in a new future."
> [With Open Hands, p. 4]

The old story suggests that God calls us to be on a journey, to let go of the securities upon which we have become dependent, to trust God for our security and in the process to become the free and whole people God has created us to be.

The story also makes a very daring promise. God will provide. God will give us the resources we need for the journey. God will provide, not necessarily what we want, but what we need. God will provide water for our thirst - living water for that profounder thirst deep inside everyone of us.

But, Moses discovers water only when the people are in the dryness of the desert. Manna is provided only in the wilderness. The Samaritan woman who encounters Jesus at the well is thirsty. She is an outcast, not fit for polite company in her own village. She's at that well at high noon because the other women get water in the evening and she is not welcome. She is desperate. "Give me living water," she asks Jesus - "Give me food and drink that will sustain my spirit."

"The threshold of religion," one commentator proposes, "is at that point when the thirsty soul stands squarely in front of the hopeless, barren desert, the seemingly impossible."

God's gifts are given only when we know our hunger and thirst; only when we need them.

So, for each of us comes a day when we must leave security behind, a day like the one years ago when we walked down the sidewalk, away from the insular safety of home on the way to school and began the adventure of becoming, a **Sacred Journey** that is still going on.

- or the day years later when our parents dropped us off at college and drove away;

- or the day when we started a new life with a stranger to whom, standing in the front of a church, young, immature and terribly unprepared, we just committed our lives "for better or worse, in sickness and in health, as long as we both shall live";

- or the day in middle years when our company down sizes, realigns management and we find ourselves in the wilderness of unemployment or an unplanned second career;

- or the day when we and our other decided we could no longer cling to the old realities and remain alive and we find ourselves alone and starting again;

- or that day when the mortgage is paid, the dog has died, the last youngster has left for college and instead of the promised land you find yourself in a new wilderness of loneliness, purposelessness, depression and remorse;

- or the day when the reality of aging becomes unavoidable, a dear friend dies, or a routine task becomes difficult, or a life-long dream has to be abandoned and you know in a final way that you are not going to live forever.

Comes a day for all of us - and each of us - when we know that our own resources are no longer adequate: that if all we have going for us is our own strength, vigor, intelligence, or our professional accomplishments, our position in the community, or our possessions, our bank accounts, stock portfolios, and pension plans, we really are rather poor and weak. Comes a day for all of us when we are hungry and thirsty and know it; when we are powerless to deal with the realities of our humanness, particularly our own mortality, our own death - at the hands of the approaching Egyptians, or the hunger and thirst burning within us, or simply the inevitable ticking of the clock... And on that day the promise is that God will provide.

The mystery of faith is that in Jesus Christ we are called to lives of intentional insecurity.

The greater mystery of faith is that when we trust God... when we open our hands... when we know our hunger and thirst... there will be bread and life and living water.

God calls us to a **Sacred Journey.** God provides what we need... Thanks be to God. Amen

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God of love: you call us into the future, sometimes away from everything we use to establish our security. Give us courage to live faithfully; give us the food and drink we need to live in Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.